Connect Academy Trust
Separated Parents Policy

Approved by the Board of
Connect Academy Trust, September 2026

Version	Date	Detail
1	September 2026	New policy

1. Purpose

Connect Academy Trust recognises that family circumstances can change and that parents may separate or divorce during their child's time at school.

The Trust is committed to ensuring that children remain at the centre of all decisions and that separated parents are treated fairly, respectfully and consistently, while recognising that individual circumstances may require different arrangements.

The purpose of this policy is to provide a clear and consistent framework for all Connect Academy Trust schools when working with separated parents, parents who do not live together, and other adults with parental responsibility.

The policy aims to:

- promote the best interests, wellbeing and educational outcomes of the child;
- ensure that parents with parental responsibility are treated appropriately and, wherever possible, kept informed about their child's education;
- provide clarity about the school's role and responsibilities;
- ensure staff do not become involved in parental disputes;
- provide a consistent approach across Connect Academy Trust schools;
- ensure that decisions are based on appropriate evidence and the individual circumstances of the child;
- ensure that any restrictions on a parent's involvement are based on appropriate legal, safeguarding or welfare considerations;
- ensure that information is recorded accurately and consistently;
- provide clear processes for communication, meetings, school events, collection arrangements, information sharing and complaints; and
- ensure that decisions can be explained and evidenced if subsequently challenged.

This policy should be read alongside the Trust's:

- Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy;
- Complaints Policy;

- Admissions Policy;
- Attendance Policy;
- Behaviour Policy;
- Data Protection and Privacy Policies;
- Online Safety Policy;
- any relevant school-specific procedures.

2. Guiding principles

Connect Academy Trust will apply the following principles when working with separated parents.

2.1 The child comes first

The welfare and best interests of the child will remain central to decisions made by the school.

The school will not allow parental disagreement to unnecessarily disrupt a child's education, relationships, attendance, activities or emotional wellbeing.

2.2 Parents are responsible for resolving parental disputes

The school is not responsible for resolving disagreements between separated parents.

Where parents disagree about matters such as:

- where a child should live;
- contact arrangements;
- holiday arrangements;
- which parent should collect the child;
- whether a child should attend an activity;
- financial arrangements;
- communication between parents; or
- other private family matters,

the school will not normally determine the dispute.

Parents should seek independent legal advice or use appropriate family dispute-resolution processes where necessary.

2.3 Parental responsibility

The school will establish, where necessary, who has parental responsibility for a child.

Having parental responsibility does not automatically mean that a parent can require the school to act on their instructions where doing so would conflict with the school's statutory duties, safeguarding responsibilities or the child's best interests.

The DfE's guidance states that schools should understand who has parental responsibility and how this affects information sharing and decision-making.

2.4 Equality and consistency

Where two parents have parental responsibility, schools should generally communicate with both parents and provide information to both, unless there is a legal, safeguarding or other legitimate reason not to do so.

The fact that a parent is not the resident parent does not, by itself, remove their parental rights.

2.5 Evidence-based decision making

Where the school is required to make a decision concerning a child, it must consider the individual circumstances of that child.

Decisions should not be based on assumptions about:

- the child's family circumstances;
- which parent the child lives with;
- the views of one parent without considering relevant information from the other;
- previous disagreements between parents; or
- generalised statements about separated families.

Where a decision may significantly affect a child, the school should ensure that there is a clear record of:

1. the decision being considered;

2. the relevant information and evidence;
3. the child's individual circumstances;
4. any safeguarding or welfare considerations;
5. the options considered;
6. the rationale for the decision; and
7. where appropriate, why the decision is considered to be in the child's best interests.

This is particularly important where a decision is likely to be challenged.

3. Scope

This policy applies to all Connect Academy Trust schools and all staff involved in working with parents and carers.

It applies to situations including, but not limited to:

- separated or divorced parents;
- parents who live at different addresses;
- parents who have never lived together;
- parents who are in dispute;
- parents with different views about their child's education;
- parents with court orders relating to their child;
- parents with or without parental responsibility;
- step-parents and other adults involved in a child's care; and
- situations where safeguarding concerns affect contact or information sharing.

4. Identifying parental responsibility

At admission, and where circumstances subsequently change, schools should establish and record relevant information about those who have parental responsibility for the child.

Where appropriate, schools should maintain:

- names of parents/persons with parental responsibility;
- contact details;
- addresses;
- emergency contact information;
- relevant relationship to the child;
- details of any known court orders or legal restrictions;
- collection arrangements where relevant; and
- any safeguarding arrangements or restrictions.

Schools should avoid making assumptions about parental responsibility based solely on:

- who the child lives with;
- who completed an admission form;
- who pays school related costs;
- who attends meetings;
- who normally collects the child; or
- the relationship between the adults.

Where parental responsibility is unclear, the school should seek appropriate evidence and/or advice.

5. **Court orders and legal restrictions**

Parents should be encouraged to provide the school with copies of any court orders or other legal documents that affect the child's education, contact, collection arrangements or information sharing.

Examples may include:

- Child Arrangements Orders;
- Prohibited Steps Orders;
- Specific Issue Orders;
- orders restricting contact;

- orders relating to parental responsibility; or
- injunctions or other relevant legal restrictions.

Where a school receives a court order, it should:

1. ensure the document is provided to the Headteacher or designated senior member of staff;
2. verify, where necessary, that the order is current and applies to the child;
3. ensure relevant staff understand what the order requires;
4. record the existence of the order securely;
5. ensure arrangements are reflected in relevant school systems;
6. seek advice where the wording or application of the order is unclear; and
7. review the arrangements if the school receives evidence that the order has been varied, discharged or replaced.

A school should not interpret a court order beyond its reasonable understanding. Where there is uncertainty, appropriate legal advice should be sought.

The school will not enforce private arrangements that are not reflected in an applicable legal order unless there is another clear legal, safeguarding or operational reason for doing so.

6. **Communication with separated parents**

Where appropriate, schools should communicate with both parents who have parental responsibility.

This includes, where relevant:

- newsletters;
- school communications;
- parents' evenings;
- reports;
- assessment information;
- information about attendance;

- educational events;
- trips and activities;
- school photographs;
- significant educational information;
- behaviour or wellbeing concerns;
- relevant meetings; and
- information about significant changes affecting the child's education.

Where the school's systems allow, both parents should have their own contact details recorded rather than relying on one parent to forward information.

Schools should not routinely rely upon one parent to act as the communication link between separated parents.

Where a parent says that they are not receiving communications, the school should check its records and systems rather than assuming that the other parent has deliberately withheld information.

7. **The school's communication with parents**

The school will communicate directly with parents about school matters.

Parents should not be expected to use the school as a means of communicating messages to one another.

For example, staff should avoid:

- passing personal messages between parents;
- asking one parent to obtain consent from the other;
- becoming involved in arguments about contact arrangements;
- communicating one parent's complaints or allegations to the other unless there is a legitimate reason to do so;
- taking sides in disputes; or
- commenting on private family arrangements.

Where parents disagree, the school should explain its role clearly and redirect the matter to the appropriate process.

8**. Meetings with parents**

Where parents are separated, schools should, where reasonably practicable, enable both parents to participate in appropriate meetings concerning their child.

This may include:

- parents' evenings;
- progress meetings;
- SEND meetings;
- pastoral meetings;
- attendance meetings;
- behaviour meetings; and
- meetings concerning educational support.

Where parents are unable to attend the same meeting due to conflict, the school may arrange separate meetings where this is proportionate and reasonably practicable.

The school is not required to arrange multiple meetings simply because parents prefer not to attend together. The approach should be determined by the individual circumstances and the school's capacity.

Where a meeting is held with one parent, staff should maintain appropriate records and ensure that relevant information is not withheld from the other parent where they are entitled to receive it.

9**. Communication where conflict is high**

Where communication between parents is particularly difficult, the school should establish clear boundaries.

This may include:

- using email as the main form of communication;
- identifying a named member of staff as the principal contact;
- asking parents to communicate separately with the school;
- providing written responses to significant issues;

- using a structured communication process;
- setting reasonable response times; and
- directing parents to the school's Complaints Policy where they wish to make a formal complaint.

Staff should remain neutral and professional.

Parents should not expect school staff to:

- investigate allegations between adults that are unrelated to school;
- provide opinions about family disputes;
- confirm one parent's version of events;
- provide evidence for family court proceedings unless legally required or appropriately requested;
- make decisions about contact arrangements; or
- change school arrangements simply because one parent requests this.

10. **Collection and collection arrangements**

Where there is no legal restriction, schools should follow their normal procedures regarding collection.

Parents are responsible for communicating private changes to their contact arrangements.

A parent should not normally be prevented from collecting their child solely because the other parent has asked the school not to allow collection.

However, the school may restrict collection where:

- there is a court order preventing or limiting collection/contact;
- there is a safeguarding concern;
- the school has been advised by the police or relevant safeguarding agency to take specific action;
- the child would otherwise be placed at risk; or
- another clear legal basis exists.

Where staff are unsure whether a child should be released to a particular person, the matter should be escalated immediately to the Headteacher or designated safeguarding lead.

Staff should not attempt to resolve disputes at the school gate.

11. **Emergency contacts**

Emergency contacts should not automatically be treated as having parental responsibility.

Schools should record parental responsibility separately from emergency contact information.

An emergency contact may be used where appropriate to support the child, but this does not automatically give that individual the right to receive confidential educational information or make decisions on behalf of the child.

12. Information sharing and data protection

Schools must comply with data protection legislation and the Trust's Data Protection Policy.

A parent requesting information about their child should not automatically be refused simply because the child lives with the other parent.

Equally, parental responsibility does not provide an unrestricted right to access every piece of information held by the school.

Schools should consider:

- the nature of the information requested;
- the legal basis for disclosure;
- whether the requester has parental responsibility;
- whether the information relates to another person;
- whether disclosure would breach another person's privacy;
- any safeguarding concerns;
- any applicable court orders; and
- the child's own rights and interests.

The ICO confirms that a child's personal information and educational records are subject to different access rights and that schools need to consider the circumstances of the individual request.

Where a parent submits a Subject Access Request (SAR), it must be handled under the Trust's Data Protection Policy and relevant data protection procedures rather than through the school's ordinary separated-parent communication process.

Staff should refer SARs to the Trust's Data Protection Lead/DPO in accordance with Trust procedures.

13**. Safeguarding**

Safeguarding takes priority over normal communication arrangements.

A parent having parental responsibility does not prevent the school from taking appropriate safeguarding action.

If a parent raises concerns about:

- domestic abuse;
- coercive or controlling behaviour;
- abduction;
- threats;
- violence;
- risk of harm to the child;
- risk associated with collection;
- inappropriate contact; or
- any other safeguarding concern,

the matter must be referred promptly to the Designated Safeguarding Lead in accordance with the Trust's safeguarding procedures.

Information should not be withheld or disclosed solely because one parent makes an allegation about the other. The school should follow its safeguarding procedures and make decisions based on appropriate evidence and professional advice.

14. **Changes to a child's school**

A school should be particularly careful when dealing with requests to:

- remove a child from the school;
- change a child's school;
- change significant educational arrangements; or
- make other significant decisions affecting the child's education.

Where parents have parental responsibility, the school should establish whether the relevant parents need to be consulted.

The DfE specifically identifies changing or removing a child from a school as an area where the position of parents with parental responsibility needs careful consideration.

Where parents disagree, the school should not simply determine the dispute itself. The parents should be advised to seek appropriate legal advice where necessary.

Any decision made by the school should be:

- based on the child's individual circumstances;
- supported by evidence;
- appropriately documented; and
- capable of being explained to the family.

15. Admissions

Admissions decisions must be made in accordance with the Trust's Admissions Policy and applicable admissions legislation.

Where parents disagree about an admissions matter, the school should not allow the disagreement itself to determine the outcome.

Admissions decisions should be based on the relevant admissions criteria and, where individual discretion is permitted, the individual circumstances and evidence relating to the child.

Where an individual case requires professional judgement, the decision-maker should record:

- the evidence considered;
- the child's individual circumstances;
- the options considered;
- the decision reached; and
- the rationale for the decision.

General statements or assumptions should not be used as a substitute for child-specific evidence.

16. Educational visits, trips and activities

Schools should apply their normal procedures for educational visits and activities.

Where parental consent is required, the school should establish who is legally entitled to provide that consent.

Where parents disagree about participation, staff should not become involved in the private dispute.

If the disagreement prevents the school from safely proceeding with the activity, the matter should be escalated to the Headteacher and, where appropriate, Trust leadership.

17. School events and photographs

Both parents should normally be treated in accordance with the school's arrangements for attending school events.

However, schools may need to make practical arrangements where parental conflict could:

- disrupt an event;
- distress the child;
- create a safeguarding concern; or
- place staff or other families in an uncomfortable or unsafe position.

Schools should follow their existing photography, filming, safeguarding and event procedures.

Data protection does not automatically prevent parents from taking photographs of their own children at school events, but schools may impose reasonable rules for safeguarding and other legitimate reasons.

18. New partners and other family members

Schools recognise that children may have step-parents, new partners, grandparents or other adults who play an important role in their lives.

Schools may communicate with these individuals where:

- a parent has authorised this;
- the individual has an appropriate role in the child's care;
- doing so is in the child's best interests; or
- there is another appropriate legal basis.

However, involvement in a child's care does not automatically confer parental responsibility or a right to access confidential information.

19. Complaints from separated parents

Parents have the right to raise concerns and make complaints in accordance with the Trust's Complaints Policy.

A parent should not be disadvantaged in accessing the complaints process because they are separated from the other parent.

However, where repeated correspondence concerns the same matter, the school may use the procedures within the Trust's Complaints Policy concerning unreasonable, persistent or vexatious complaints where appropriate.

Schools should ensure that:

- each complaint is logged accurately;
- the issues raised are clearly identified;
- relevant evidence is considered;
- the response addresses the specific issues raised;
- assumptions are avoided;
- the rationale for decisions is explained;

- the child-specific evidence supporting significant decisions is recorded; and
- the response is proportionate and professional.

A complaint should not be dismissed simply because the parent has complained previously.

Equally, previous complaints should not automatically determine the outcome of a new complaint.

Each complaint must be considered on its own merits, while relevant history may be taken into account where appropriate.

20. Avoiding conflicts between school and family processes

The school should avoid becoming a source of evidence or a participant in family disputes wherever possible.

Parents should not routinely ask staff to:

- provide statements about the other parent;
- comment on parenting arrangements;
- confirm what a child has allegedly said about the other parent outside school;
- provide opinions about who the child should live with;
- provide information for use in private disputes without following the appropriate legal or data protection process; or
- intervene in disagreements about child maintenance or financial arrangements.

Where a court formally requires information from the school, the school should follow its procedure for responding to court orders and seek appropriate advice where required.

21. The child's voice

The child's views should be considered in accordance with their age, maturity and understanding.

Children should not be placed in the middle of parental disputes.

Staff should not:

- ask children to carry messages between parents;
- ask children to choose between parents;
- question children unnecessarily about parental disputes;
- ask children to keep information from either parent; or
- use children as a means of resolving adult disagreements.

Where a child raises concerns about family circumstances, staff should respond appropriately and follow safeguarding and pastoral procedures.

The child should not be expected to manage communication between separated parents and the school.

22. Record keeping

Schools should maintain accurate, factual and proportionate records relating to significant separated-parent issues.

Records should distinguish between:

- fact;
- information provided by a parent;
- professional observation;
- allegation;
- evidence;
- decision; and
- rationale.

Staff should avoid recording subjective or emotive comments about either parent.

Where a significant decision is made, the record should explain:

What was decided?

Why was it decided?

What evidence was considered?

How were the child's individual circumstances considered?

Were safeguarding considerations relevant?

Was advice sought?

Who made the decision?

When will the decision be reviewed, if appropriate?

This will help ensure that decisions are transparent, consistent and capable of being explained if subsequently challenged.

23. Staff responsibilities

All staff should:

- remain professional and impartial;
- keep the child's welfare at the centre;
- avoid becoming involved in parental disputes;
- follow the Trust's policies and procedures;
- record significant information appropriately;
- escalate safeguarding concerns;
- refer complex legal matters to the Headteacher/appropriate Trust lead;
- avoid giving parents legal advice;
- ensure information is shared appropriately; and
- seek advice where they are unsure.

Staff should not make assumptions about a parent based on previous interactions or complaints.

24. Headteacher responsibilities

The Headteacher is responsible for ensuring that:

- appropriate information about parental responsibility is recorded;
- relevant court orders are understood and implemented;
- staff know how to respond to separated-parent situations;
- significant decisions are appropriately documented;

- safeguarding concerns are referred appropriately;
- communication arrangements are reasonable and proportionate;
- complaints are handled in accordance with the Trust's Complaints Policy; and
- complex cases are escalated to the appropriate Trust officer.

25. Trust-level support and escalation

Where a separated-parent situation is complex, high conflict or likely to have significant legal implications, the Headteacher should seek advice from the appropriate Trust lead.

This may include:

- Governance Professional;
- Executive Leadership Team;
- Designated Safeguarding Lead;
- Data Protection Officer;
- HR/legal advisers;

Schools should seek advice before making significant decisions where:

- parents provide conflicting court orders;
- the legal position is unclear;
- there are allegations of safeguarding concerns;
- a parent is threatening legal action;
- a parent requests confidential information about another person;
- a child may be moved to another school;
- the school is being asked to provide information for court proceedings; or
- there is a risk that the school may inadvertently become involved in a family dispute.

26. Review of significant decisions

Where a significant decision concerning a child has been challenged, the school should review whether:

- the correct process was followed;
- all relevant evidence was considered;
- the child's individual circumstances were properly considered;
- the rationale was clearly recorded;
- the decision was communicated clearly;
- the school inadvertently became involved in the parental dispute; and
- any learning should be incorporated into future practice.

Where a decision has been found to be insufficiently evidenced or inadequately explained, the school should consider whether a further review or response is appropriate.

The Trust is committed to learning from complaints and using them to improve practice.

27. Confidentiality

Information concerning family circumstances should only be shared with staff who need the information to carry out their role.

Sensitive information should be stored securely and handled in accordance with the Trust's Data Protection Policy.

Staff should not discuss family disputes with other parents, pupils or members of the wider school community.

28. When the school may decline a parental request

A school may decline a request from a parent where:

- it is outside the school's legal responsibilities;
- complying would conflict with a statutory duty;
- it would create a safeguarding risk;
- the request conflicts with a court order;

- the request would breach another person's confidentiality or data protection rights;
- the request would require the school to determine a private family dispute;
- the request is disproportionate or unreasonable; or
- the request is otherwise inconsistent with Trust policy or legal requirements.

Where a request is declined, the school should, where appropriate, explain the reason clearly and identify the appropriate route for the parent to pursue the matter.

29. Key message for parents

Connect Academy Trust recognises that separation can be difficult for families.

Our schools will:

- Put children first.
- Treat parents fairly and respectfully.
- Communicate appropriately with parents who have parental responsibility.
- Follow court orders and safeguarding requirements.
- Keep accurate records.
- Make decisions based on evidence and the individual circumstances of the child.
- Explain significant decisions clearly.
- Remain neutral in parental disputes.
- Work with families wherever possible.

However, schools cannot act as mediators between parents or determine private family disputes.

Where parents cannot reach agreement, they should seek appropriate independent advice.

30. Related legislation and guidance

This policy should be interpreted alongside current legislation and statutory guidance, including:

- Children Act 1989;
- Education Act 1996;
- Education Act 2002;
- Education (Pupil Information) (England) Regulations 2005;
- Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006;
- UK General Data Protection Regulation;
- Data Protection Act 2018;
- Equality Act 2010;
- relevant safeguarding legislation and statutory guidance; and
- Department for Education guidance on parental responsibility.

The DfE guidance on parental responsibility applies to academies and free schools and provides specific guidance for schools dealing with separated parents and disputes about parental responsibility.

Appendix 1 – Separated Parents: Staff Quick Reference

When a parent contacts the school about a separated-parent issue, staff should ask themselves:

1. Does the parent have parental responsibility?

If unsure, check the school's records and seek advice.

2. Is there a court order?

If yes, obtain a copy and refer to the Headteacher/appropriate senior leader.

3. Is there a safeguarding concern?

If yes, refer immediately to the DSL.

4. Is this actually a school decision?

If it concerns private arrangements between parents, the school should not normally determine the matter.

5. Does the request concern personal data?

If yes, consider the Data Protection Policy and refer SARs appropriately.

6. Is a significant decision about the child being made?

If yes, ensure that the decision is:

- child-centred;
- evidence-based;
- individual to the child;
- properly documented; and
- clearly explained.

7. Are we being asked to take sides?

If yes, remain neutral and explain the school's role.

8. Have we recorded what happened?

Significant conversations, decisions and evidence should be recorded factually.

Appendix 2 – Suggested Parent Statement for schools

Connect Academy Trust recognises that separation can be challenging for families. Our priority is to ensure that children continue to feel safe, supported and able to thrive at school.

Where parents have parental responsibility, we will seek to communicate appropriately with both parents and provide relevant information about their child's education, subject to legal, safeguarding and data protection requirements.

Our schools cannot become involved in private disagreements between parents or determine arrangements relating to residence or contact.

Where parents disagree about a significant matter affecting their child, we will consider the child's individual circumstances, relevant evidence and any applicable legal requirements. Where necessary, parents may be asked to seek independent legal advice.

We ask all parents to communicate respectfully with school staff and to avoid placing children in the middle of adult disagreements.

Our aim is to work constructively with families while ensuring that the child's welfare and education remain at the centre of our decisions.